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Hot Topic: Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program (2006)

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March 9, 2006

**THE 2006 ASSISTANCE TO FIREFIGHTERS GRANT PROGRAM
PERSISTENCE: THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL FUNDING**

Gary L. West, Fire Management Consultant

The Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program was established in 2001 as a federal funding method to help local fire departments enhance their ability to protect the health and safety of the public and firefighting personnel, with respect to fire and fire-related hazards. The program has been funded for 2006 and is in the proposed federal budget for 2007.

The AFG has changed some over the past several years but remains a successful program. Grants are awarded each year on a competitive basis to applicants that address AFG program priorities, demonstrate financial need, and demonstrate the community benefit to be derived from their projects. For fiscal year 2005, Congress appropriated \$650 million to carry out the activities of the AFG program.

The AFG program is administered by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Grants and Training (G&T) in cooperation with the United States Fire Administration (USFA). The USFA is a division within the Department of

Homeland Security. The mission of the USFA is to reduce life and economic losses due to fire and related emergencies through leadership, advocacy, coordination, and support.

To assist fire departments in understanding and writing a proposal for this grant, a series of workshops are offered in addition to an online tutorial and detailed grant guidance document.

The following schedule is anticipated for the 2006 AFG grant process:

Workshops	January–March 2006
Application Period . .	March–April 2006
Application Scoring	April 2006
Peer Review	April–May 2006
Technical Review	May–June 2006
Awards	June–December 2006

The grant application period began at 8 a.m. EDT on March 6, 2006. The deadline to submit an AFG fire grant application is 5 p.m. EDT on April 7, 2006.

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AFG NATIONWIDE OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS

Year	No. Awarded	Amount in U.S.	No. in Tennessee	Amount in Tennessee
2005	5,725	\$585,619,250	162	\$19,224,242
2004	7,876	\$684,326,324	216	\$18,905,249
2003	8,748	\$705,233,919	275	\$19,662,771
2002	5,314	\$334,365,430	186	\$11,509,571
2001	1,855	\$ 91,996,439	50	\$ 2,436,088
Totals	29,518	\$2,401,541,362	889	\$71,737,921

Since 2001, Tennessee has been successful in the AFG program by receiving three percent of the overall grants awarded and 2.99 percent of the federal share of money awarded. In 2005, Tennessee was ranked 14th in the nation for the dollar amount of awards received and 16th in the number of awards received. This is a success story, but considering that Tennessee has one of the highest fire death rates in the nation, it is obvious that this funding is very much needed.

Statistics of the AFG 2001-2005 (United States)

Number of applications = 112,570
 Number of awards since 2001 = 29,518
 (1 in 4 applicants are awarded),
 26 percent success rate

Statistics for Tennessee of the AFG 2001-2005

Number of applications = 2,577
 Number of awards since 2001 = 889
 for a total of \$71,737,921,
 (1 in 3 applicants are awarded),
 34.5 percent success rate

AFG IN TENNESSEE OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS

Presently in Tennessee there are 722 fire departments registered with the Tennessee State Fire Marshal's Office. All but 59 of these departments have applied for some type of FEMA grant over the past five years. In addition, 22 of the 59 departments that didn't apply did, however, start the process by registering with FEMA and completing a fire department census.

Over the past five years, a total of 155 Tennessee fire departments have applied unsuccessfully for AFG grants. As can be seen in the table below, the more times a fire department applies, the higher the success rate. By analyzing this data it becomes clear that persistence is the key to successful AFG funding.

Following are statistics on Tennessee fire departments that have applied but were unsuccessful:

- 38 departments applied only one time
- 36 departments applied two times
- 28 departments applied three times

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- 13 departments applied four times
- 14 departments applied five times
- Seven departments applied six times
- Four departments applied seven times
- One department applied eight times

The fire departments most successful in receiving grants included both career and volunteer departments. The following fire departments have been deemed the most successful fire departments in Tennessee based on the number of times awarded:

- Columbia Fire Department: successful six times
- Newport Fire Department: successful five times
- Pleasant View Fire Department: successful five times

The following 14 fire departments have each been successful four times:

- Elizabethton Fire Department
- Cumberland Gap Volunteer Fire Department
- Tracy City Volunteer Fire Department
- East Ridge Fire Department
- Goshen Valley Fire Department
- Brownsville/Haywood County Volunteer Fire Department
- Sequatchie Volunteer Fire Department
- Berlin Fire Department
- Finger Volunteer Fire Department
- Memphis Fire Services
- Gilt Edge Volunteer Fire Department
- Union County Rescue Squad and Fire Services
- Johnson City Fire Department
- Brentwood Fire Department

Another 52 fire departments have been successful three times.

Below is a summary of the types of grant award for fire departments within the state of Tennessee.

Grant Area—

Tennessee	Number	Total Amt.
Fire Ops & Safety	635	\$44,942,176
Fire Prevention	52	\$ 3,066,197
PPE & Equipment	31	\$ 1,534,965
Vehicles	165	\$19,435,953
Hiring (SAFER)	2	\$ 2,700,000
Wellness	2	\$ 30,646
Training	2	\$ 27,984

HOW TO APPLY FOR THE 2006 AFG

Applying for an AFG grant is relatively easy, but you must have some information before you start your application. The following three items are necessary to start the grant process:

- Username/Password
- EIN/Tax ID Number
- DUNS Number

This is explained on the AFG Web site at www.firegrantsupport.com along with details of the grant application process. This is a very user-friendly Web site and well worth the time you may spend exploring it.

GRANT-WRITING TECHNIQUES

Be accurate, complete and honest, and get started early. You must read the guidance document carefully and follow

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all instructions. You should also refer often to the grant Web site and pay close attention to the Frequently Asked Questions section. Phase one of the scoring is done electronically and is based on key words from the program priorities. Applications that focus on the funding priorities will have a better chance of reaching the competitive range. With this in mind, the grant writer should stick to the grant priorities. Another thing to remember is that when you mix low-priority requests with high-priority requests, your overall score will be reduced. Item scores are based on the relative cost/merit of each activity or item. The phase two evaluation is the competitive section where each application is evaluated by a panel of at least three peer reviewers. The peer reviewers focus primarily on the project narrative but also consider answers to the general questions and activity-specific questions. The panelists rate the application on four criteria and you must address all four areas. They include

- **Project description and budget**—A clear statement on what will be accomplished and how much it will cost.
- **Financial need**—Justifying that you cannot pay for the project without assistance from this grant.
- **Cost/Benefit**—Justifying benefits and not just presenting a wish list.
- **Improvement to daily operations**—Rationalize how daily operations will be improved.

Several things are critical to writing the narrative, but most importantly the

process should begin with performing a risk assessment. Effective grant applications are based on addressing the gap between the community risk assessment and the department need or capability assessment. Successful applicants match their greatest risks to the program priorities.

BEFORE YOU START YOUR APPLICATION

Helpful Hints

- Attend the AFG workshop
- Work as a team to conduct risk assessment and needs analysis
- Plan to submit your application early
- Write the narrative offline
- Avoid templates from other sources
- Don't use bullets and special fonts, which will not transfer to the online application
- Look for gaps; never leave a panelist wondering
- Print the application and ask someone to read it before submitting
- Do not submit the application before it is reviewed
- Do not capitalize the narrative
- Be yourself—don't embellish
- Use spell check and grammar check
- Be concise and clear.

For AFG help, consult the following:

- The Web site at www.firegrantsupport.com;
- The help desk at (866) 274-0960; or
- The Web site at firegrants@dhs.gov.

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OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

The AFG program office offers three grant opportunities each year. AFG fire grant funds are used by the nation's firefighters and first responders to increase the effectiveness of firefighting and emergency response operations. SAFER grants provide funding for the hiring of firefighting personnel and incentives for volunteer recruitment and retention. The application period for SAFER grants is June 2006. The third grant opportunity will be in September 2006 when the AFG program office opens an application period for Fire Prevention and Safety grants. These grants support not only fire departments but also other organizations involved in fire prevention and firefighter safety research. Through the Department of Homeland Security

Appropriations Act of 2006, Congress provided \$648 million for the Assistance to Firefighters Grants, with \$108 million of the funding specified for SAFER grants and a minimum of \$27 million for the Fire Prevention and Safety grants.

SUMMARY

The more times you apply, the better the chances that your department will receive a FEMA grant. If you are serious about applying for funding, read the guidance document carefully, apply for funds for the priorities listed, and justify why you need the grant. Follow the instructions and start early on the narrative.

And finally, if you need help, just ask!

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The Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS) is a statewide agency of The University of Tennessee Institute for Public Service. MTAS operates in cooperation with the Tennessee Municipal League to provide technical assistance services to officials of Tennessee's incorporated municipalities. Assistance is offered in areas such as accounting, administration, finance, public works, ordinance codification, and wastewater management.

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